Turkish foreign policy during the Second World War: an 'active' neutrality

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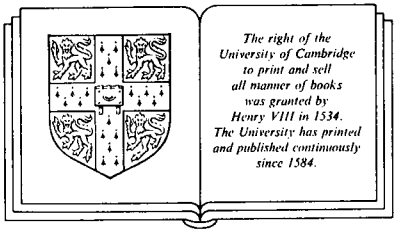

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INTRODUCTION

Turkish foreign policy during the period under review remains one of the major feats of diplomatic tightrope walking in the annals of recent international relations. Turkey managed to manoeuvre herself into a position where she had a formal and explicit Treaty of Mutual Assistance with Great Britain as well as a Friendship and Non-Aggression Pact with Germany. The country seen on the map of 1941 forms, 'a great oblong pad of poorly developed territory', jutting out into Nazi-dominated Europe, entirely surrounded by Axis or pro-Axis forces.[1] Encircled and enticed as she was, Turkey was able to achieve her primary aim of staying out of the universe of devastation which surrounded her.

She owed this entirely to the consistency of her foreign policy. This policy consisted of a set of realistically understood possibilities, limitations, advantages and handicaps which constantly guided the Turkish decision makers. This small and homogeneous body of men formed the ruling elite in Turkey and held the monopoly of real power. To a large extent Turkish foreign policy stemmed from their common experiences and beliefs. These men acknowledged the fact that Turkey was no longer the world power which the Ottoman Empire had once been, and that she had to order her policy accordingly. They knew also that the emerging forces in Europe had been for some time approaching a head-on collision.

As early as 1931, Mustafa Kemal had said: 'The Treaty of Versailles has not removed any of the causes that led to the First World War. Quite to the contrary it has deepened the rift between the former rivals . . .'[2] As the leader of the new Turkey lay on his death-bed in 1938 he advised his followers: 'A World War is near. In the course of this war international equilibrium will be entirely destroyed. If during this period we act unwisely and make the smallest mistake, we

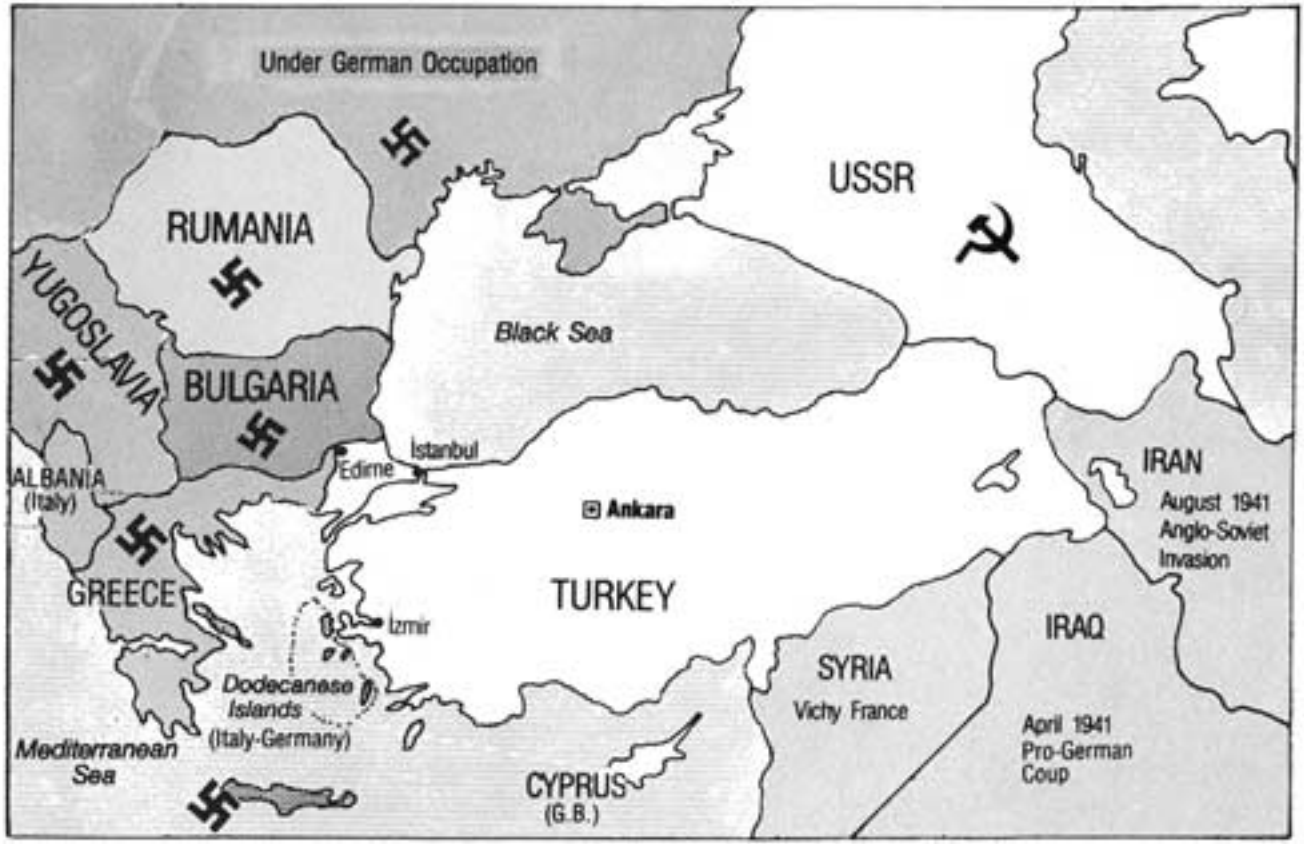

Fig.1 German occupation 1941. *Map by: Hakan Derman*

will be faced with an even graver catastrophe than in the Armistice years.'[3]

Mustafa Kemal and his followers fully recognised the fact that the Turkey which emerged from the War of Liberation (1919–22) was a poor and tired country. They realised that a prolonged period of peace was necessary for Turkey to heal her wounds. Therefore they based their policy on the principle of 'Peace at Home, Peace Abroad.' The Turkish leaders were, however, undeniably of Ottoman upbringing and they adapted much of Ottoman diplomatic thinking to their new polity. The British Ambassador to Turkey, Sir Percy Loraine, reported on 9 April 1938: 'The Sick Man is dead, but he has left behind him a number of lusty children.'[4] Thus Loraine acknowledged the heritage of Turkey's leaders. But he also recognised that their aims were very different from those of a crumbling Empire: 'Turkey has not a second Empire to lose, nor has she today any wish to create one . . . in developing her still extensive territory . . . She has enough to keep her busy for a century.' The Ambassador pointed out that the Turks had wearied of war and stated, 'In their settled policy there is no room for adventure.'[5]

Loraine's astute assessment correctly defined the constant and ultimate goal of the Turkish leaders: the survival and continuity of Turkey as a sovereign independent state. This precluded any form of adventurism and demanded a very cautious approach to foreign policy. Thus the Turkish foreign policy formulators based their decision-making on the following premises:

(a) Turkey has an exceptional geopolitical location. This is both an advantage and a disadvantage. It is an advantage because she therefore assumes an importance greater than a non-strategically based small power. This enables her to have an influential voice in the foreign affairs arena, it also enables her to attract strong friends.[6]

(b) But this is also a disadvantage, being placed where she is makes it more difficult for Turkey to avoid confrontation with major powers. The strategic location draws covetous glances. The advantage which enables her to attract powerful friends can likewise lead to the unwelcome attentions of a 'protector'.

(c) Turkey is a 'small country at the crossroads', therefore she has to seek to maintain a maximum freedom of movement. This means she has to avoid the formation of power blocks, or if they exist already she has to avoid joining them. She must strive to dilute power into as many different nations as possible.[7]

(d) A small power ultimately stands or falls only according to the efficiency of its own resources. Formulas such as 'Traditional friendship', 'hereditary enemy', or 'long lasting history of cooperation' are devoid of any real meaning. Practical politics will inevitably triumph over idealism, promises and sentiment. In Tamkoç's words, 'The international system, despite the general lip service to the concept of community relationship based on friendship is basically anarchic . . . power is still the overriding consideration of nations'.[8]

(e) Because this is so Turkey should always be prepared to fight for the defence of her rights and territory. These should be clearly defined and the intention to defend them by force of arms if necessary should be clearly stated. But alongside this it must be emphasised that Turkey will go to war only in defence.

(f) Practical politics in the case of a small power inevitably involve bargaining. Bargaining is one of the key tools for the survival of a small state. 'Tough bargaining was considered by the Turks as the highest patriotism.'[9]

In view of the above, Turkish foreign policy was a synthesis of the experiences and convictions of the governing elite.

Leaders such as President İnönü and Foreign Ministers such as Saraçoğlu and Menemencioğlu employed a distinctly pragmatic approach in their foreign policy decision making. Their experience had taught them to be wary of European powers and this manifested itself in their dealings with them. Medlicott assesses the British–French–Turkish Treaty of 1939 in these terms: 'This intense nationalism, built on a suspicion of European powers with whom it was nevertheless desired to cooperate, meant that the alliance with Britain and France was a matter of the purest expediency for Turkey and had no basis of sentiment and habit.'[10] İnönü himself stated the position:

> There was the possibility of an alliance with Britain, France and the Soviet Union. As a consequence it was possible that we would fight on the same side. I considered this from the very outset to be the least harmful to our interests . . . When events progressed beyond the limit of our predictions, precautions had to be suited to the time and the needs.[11]

Therefore, İnönü considered the alliance with the west as something of a necessary evil. And when events 'progressed beyond the limit of predictions', i.e. when the Soviet Union was not brought into the alliance, when France collapsed and Britain seemed on the brink of disaster, policy had to be adjusted accordingly. The British could not appreciate that their goal should not be exactly the goal of every honest man. The Turks, although largely sympathetic towards the British during their fight for survival, saw things differently. The alliance with Britain had been entirely a defensive measure, by

making their alliance with Britain and France the Turkish leaders felt they were taking out an insurance policy for their own benefit. To the British, the treaty with Turkey was an instrument for securing Turkey's effective collaboration in the war effort.

This situation led to what I have called the Anglo-Turkish contradiction. The British felt they had the legitimate right to ask Turkey to muster all her strength and join in the fight for what they considered to be a common cause. The Turks, on the other hand, saw no reason to risk their very existence which had cost them so dear in what was primarily a war of the European powers' own making. They sought no territorial gain and desired no substantial revision of their international position. All Turkey would achieve by entering the war, Menemencioğlu believed, would be to serve as a battleground for the Great Powers.[12] On one occasion Menemencioğlu told the German Ambassador von Papen: 'The objective of our foreign policy is to protect our self-determination to the end. I am certain that if we entered the war, our self-determination will be destroyed, and there would not be the slightest gain for my country . . .'[13] The Turkish attitude was perhaps best expressed by Menemencioğlu's telling von Papen: 'We are egoists and fight exclusively for ourselves.'[14]

There is little doubt that in terms of foreign policy leadership Turkey was fortunate to have men of such a high level of competence as İnönü and Menemencioğlu. Morgenthau has named 'The quality of diplomacy' as, 'the most important of all the factors that make for the power of a nation.'[15] 'By using the power potentialities of a nation to best advantage, a competent diplomacy can increase the power of a nation beyond what one would expect it to be in view of all the other factors combined.'[16] In other words, quality of leadership in this crucial sphere is essential if a nation is to be successful in its policy.

But Morgenthau and Tamkoç make the mistake of generalising on the concept of 'National Character.'[17] In his section on 'Turkish Political Culture' Tamkoç states that the 'fundamental characteristics of political beliefs' held by Turks are as follows: 'The individual regards himself first and foremost as a Turk, endowed with special qualities, powers and obligations to protect and preserve the motherland of the Turkish polity . . . Almost equal in importance, however, is his belief in himself as a Moslem, which in his way of thinking is nearly synonymous with the word Turk.'[18] Tamkoç then points out that every Turk is 'suspicious of "strangers" (*yabancılar*) and

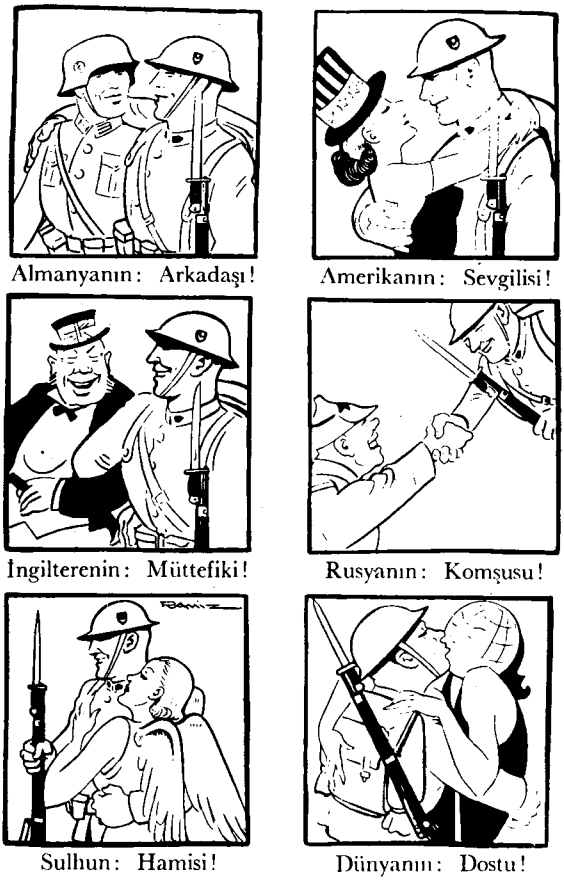

Fig. 2 The Turkish cartoonist Ramiz' perception of Turkey's relations with the major powers during the Second World War. Translation of captions from left to right reads: The Comrade of Germany; The Sweetheart of America; The Ally of Britain; The Neighbor of Russia; The Protector of Peace; The Friend of the World. *(Source: Metin Tamkoç, 'The Warrior Diplomats'.)*

foreigners, usually identified as *gâvurlar* (e.g. *Moskof gâvuru*) bent upon exploiting the human and natural resources of his motherland'.[19]

Instead of vague and fragile generalisations about the 'national character' of a whole people this book will deal with the experiences and actions of a specific elite, those involved in the making of foreign policy during this period.

In the mid thirties, this elite perceived the major threat to Turkish security to be Italy, with its heavily fortified islands just off the Turkish coast, and Mussolini's trumpetings of 'Mare Nostrum'. The significance of Italy in Turkish thinking is often overlooked by writers who use the benefit of hindsight and take into account Italy's poor performance in the actual hostilities. Weisband focuses exclusively on the Soviets as the primary threat to Turkey and makes no mention of Italy,[20] yet Italy loomed large on the world scene in the twenties and thirties. Elizabeth Monroe comments in a book written in 1938: 'The Turkish dislike of Italy dates back to the war of 1911–12 and the capture of the Dodecanese and Libya. It simmered during the World War and grew vehement after the Armistice when Italy's aims were discovered to include a province in Asia Minor.'[21] After Italy was denied her prize in the Antalya region she, 'mourned aloud for the lost province'.[22] Contemporary apologists of Fascist foreign policy also mourned aloud the passing of, 'the good natured easy going Oriental race of the past with whom it was always possible to come to a friendly understanding'.[23] Fear and suspicion of Italy were the primary factors leading to Turkey's *rapprochement* with Britain.

A study of Turkish foreign policy should ideally be based on Turkish archives. But unfortunately this is not possible as the main Turkish archival material dealing with the foreign policy of this period is closed to private research.[24] The Soviet archives for this period are also unavailable. For instance one episode I have been unable to deal with as a result of this is the Turkish–Soviet agreement of non-aggression concluded in March 1941, as an increasingly more anxious Soviet Union cast about for contingency plans to guard against German aggression. Therefore I have had to use the British Foreign Office archives as my main unpublished source. I have attempted to balance this by using available Turkish material. As such I have made use of published and unpublished memoirs and the press. In particular Numan Menemencioğlu's unpublished memoirs, 'Les Détroits vus de la Mediterranée: aperçus, études, souvenirs,'

constitutes a very useful source by a man who was a central figure at this time.[25] I have given special prominence to the press, therefore we need to consider what it can tell us. Given the fact that the press was controlled, it forms an invaluable source of information on government thinking. The media was strictly controlled by the government through a number of laws and press regulations. The most important of these was press regulation No. 1,881 which could be applied to impose fines and prison sentences on columnists as well as close down their papers if they published articles 'undermining public confidence in the State, or in the officials of the State'.[26] In addition to this first tier of control there was also the fact that martial law had been declared in six provinces including İstanbul. This meant that papers could also be closed by order of the martial law authorities. A recent article by Koçak gives an excellent summary of the government's relations with the press.[27]

The official organ by which the government regulated the press was the General Directorate of the Press (Matbuat Umum Müdürlüğü). This body supervised the papers down to the most minute details. It often issued general directives determining how much coverage was to be given to what item, even specifying the number of columns, the use or non-use of photographs, emphasising that official war bulletins of both sides should get exactly equal column space.[28]

Because of the low literacy rate the public which could read and follow the news constituted only a small minority. Much of Turkey's press comment during the war years seems therefore to be directed towards the outside world. The Allies as well as the Axis closely followed the editorial comments of Turkey's leading columnists. The British *Review of the Foreign Press* regularly gave translations of excerpts from Turkey's leading newspapers.[29] The most important of these was the *Ulus*. It was the official organ of the Republican Peoples' Party and under the direction of Falih Rıfkı Atay, a trusted figure in government circles.[30] The distinguished journalist Ahmet Şükrü Esmer was the foreign editor of the *Ulus* and was considered generally as one of the leading authorities on foreign affairs. The *Cumhuriyet* was generally regarded as favouring Germany.[31] But owner-editor Nadir Nadi has emphasised in his memoirs that he, along with his father Yunus Nadi, were merely trying to urge a more neutral policy.[32] Both *Cumhuriyet* and *Tasvir-i Efkâr* had men on their staffs who were billed as pro-German.

The most consistently anti-German paper was on the left of the

political spectrum, the *Tan*. Owned and managed by Zekeriya Sertel and his wife Sabiha Sertel, it was destroyed by rioting right-wingers in 1945.[33] *Akşam* was regarded as being one of the more moderate papers, under the direction of Necmettin Sadak. One of Turkey's most eminent journalists was Hüseyin Cahit Yalçın. Known primarily for his outspoken criticism of Hitler and his equally anti-Russian attitude he directed *Yeni Sabah* and *Tanin*.[34] Although various papers came to be regarded as pro-Allied or pro-German it must be realised that such classification runs the risk of being arbitrary. Even *Cumhuriyet* was

Table 1. *List of closures in Turkish press (1939–45)*

Name of newspaper or magazine	Total period of closure	Number of closures	Deciding authority
Cumhuriyet	5 months and 9 days	5	3 times by government twice by martial law authorities.
Tan	2 months and 13 days. (Closed indefinitely after 12 Aug. 1944)	7	4 times by government 3 times by martial law authorities.
Vatan	7.5 months and 9 days (Closed indefinitely after 30 Sept. 1944)	9	5 times by government 4 times by martial law authorities.
Tasvir-i Efkâr	3 months (Closed indefinitely after 30 Sept. 1944)	8	4 times by government 4 times by martial law authorities.
Vakit	12 days	2	once by government once by martial law authorities.
Yeni Sabah	6 days	3	once by government twice by martial law authorities.
Akbaba	47 days	4	once by government 3 times by martial law authorities.
Son Posta	11 days	4	4 times by government
Haber	10 days	2	twice by martial law authorities.

Source: Cemil Koçak, 'İkinci Dünya Savaşı ve Türk Basını' (The Turkish Press in the Second World War), *Tarih ve Toplum*, No. 35, November 1986, pp. 29–33.

billed at one point by the British as 'friendly' and *Tasvir-i Efkâr* as 'not pro-German'.[35] Yet in October 1940 the *Review* had reported that *Cumhuriyet* and *Tasvir-i Efkâr* had been closed down by the government for articles which 'accepted the inevitability of German hegemony'.[36]

Although the men who controlled or wrote for Turkey's papers had their own inclinations, the government made sure they stayed within certain stated parameters. The *Review* concluded in its 31 October 1941 issue:

> Neither of the extreme wings forms in any sense an Opposition Press. The whole press is united in its support of the Government's policy of neutrality, rearmament, defence of Turkey's frontiers in case of attack, the maintenance of the British alliance, and friendship and commercial relations with Germany. The difference between the two extreme wings lies in the degree in which the last two planks of the policy are emphasized.[37]

Many of the leading columnists were also Deputies in the Assembly; Ahmet Emin Yalman, Falih Rıfkı Atay, Ahmet Şükrü Esmer, Nadir Nadi, Hüseyin Cahit Yalçın, Necmettin Sadak, all held seats. Because of this the restraint shown in the press was to some extent self-imposed, although having the columnists in government helped İnönü to control them.[38] Also, according to the 1939 Regulation of the Republican Peoples' Party (article 160) the owners of major newspapers who were also party members were constrained to publish, 'within the principles of the party . . .' and not to 'disseminate views damaging to the general internal and external policies of the party . . .'[39]

Government sources, however, frequently proclaimed that there was freedom of the press in Turkey, and this was echoed in the papers. On 18 January 1940 the Prime Minister, Refik Saydam, told the Assembly: 'The liberty of the press is nowadays considered in many countries incompatible with the maintenance of internal order; we believe it to be the mainstay of that order. . .'[40] On 9 October 1939 *Yeni Sabah* and *Tan* protested at the insinuation in the German papers that the Turkish press was controlled. *Tan* proclaimed: 'In Turkey the press is free, there is no censorship. If the papers are united in defending the country's interests, that is because they are acting as the interpreters of Turkish public opinion . . .' *Yeni Sabah* declared, 'The free press is an institution for which the Presidency of İnönü will be gratefully remembered. . .'[41]

It particularly suited the government to emphasise freedom of the

press when their official line seemed at variance with press statements. In this manner they were able to maintain an official stance of neutrality while intimating their true feelings through the press. Often when the Germans confronted the Turkish leaders with the unfavourable attitude of the Turkish press towards Germany, İnönü or Menemencioğlu could say that the press was free to say what it wanted. Similarly, when the British pointed to a seeming inclination to favour Germany they were told that the press was free, and reassured about the official position. This served to pacify the Germans while it reassured the British about Turkey's loyalty.

One can safely say that at all times during the war years the press broadly followed the government line. Nothing illustrates this better than the case of Numan Menemencioğlu. After the Cairo Summit in December 1943, the newspapers hailed his statement to the press as, 'The crystal clear words of a Minister who does not pursue hidden goals . . .'[42] Yet after his fall from favour he was criticised for his 'suspicious' and 'confused' policy.[43] Not one paper defended him, although some made excuses for his behaviour.

This book is divided into analytical and chronological sections. I have split my examination of the period into years purely for the sake of convenience and would not like to suggest that each year of the war constitutes a separate entity for study. In the first three chapters I have concentrated on the elements which formed the basis of Turkish policy making, and the men who were responsible for its formulation and implementation. In these chapters I have looked at how historical, social, economic and military factors influenced Turkey's leaders. In the chronological section I have examined the various phases through which foreign policy passed, as Turkey reacted to European crises.